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# **Guidance on Ethics**

# **for Undergraduate and Taught Masters Research Projects/ Dissertations**

**School Research Committee**

# **School of Food and Nutritional Sciences**

# **University College Cork**

**November 2022**

**Version 1**



# Introduction

This guidance is for students pursuing undergraduate and taught post graduate research projects and their supervisors, within School of Food and Nutritional Sciences (SFNS). This guidance has been developed to increase awareness of best practice in research integrity and ethical approaches.

The Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) in the University does not, under normal circumstances, review and approve research projects and related research activities conducted as part of taught undergraduate, taught short course programmes, or undergraduate dissertations. The SFNS recognises that research involving undergraduate and post graduate students is often more about the holistic development of student competencies in the ethical conduct of research rather than the production of research findings. This does not reduce the importance of addressing relevant ethical issues associated with the research.

The School Research Ethics Committee, within the SFNS, is a subgroup of the School Research Committee and will review and approve research projects and related research activities conducted as part of taught undergraduate, taught short course programmes, or undergraduate dissertations. The School Research Ethics Committee has developed a check list system (see Part A of the Research Ethics Form in Appendix A) to help the student and supervisor to identify the level of ethical risk associated with the project. Students engaged in taught courses (at undergraduate level) are strongly encouraged to read the ethical guidelines in their course handbooks and to propose research projects considered by the student and the supervisor to present **very low ethical risk**. However, what constitutes an acceptable ethical risk or a sensitive issue and what the threshold is for a project to be considered high/ low risk can be subjective and can vary across disciplinary areas. Supervisors are advised to consult with the School Research Ethics Committee, but only if in significant doubt about the level of ethical risk associated with a student project. Many students will use the internet as a research resource which is understandable; however, students need to know that there are both ethical and legal challenges involved in the collection and use of data online, and particularly if online research is being conducted which involves human subjects, please see Appendix E in this document for more guidance. Staff and students are advised to comply with UCC’s (2021) Code of Research Conduct when conducting research, which is available at the following link:

<https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/research/researchatucc/researchsupports/researchintegrity/UCCCodeofResearchConductV2.4-approved14thSeptember2021.pdf>

The following may also be helpful toward assessing the ethical risk involved in a project.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Issue** | **Low Risk** | **High Risk** |
|  | Sensitivity of Research Topic | The research topic is not sensitive. | The research topic is sensitive e.g. Involves human subjects, proposes new processes, collects personally identifiable information.Research which could induce psychological stress, anxiety or humiliation or cause more than minimal pain.Research involving special category data this is data: •which reveals racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership ;•data concerning health (the physical or mental health of a person, including the provision of health care services) ;•data concerning sex life or sexual orientation ; or•genetic or biometric data processed to uniquely identify a natural person. |
|  | Participant Recruitment | Research being conducted is with policy makers/ policy implementers; professionally trained service providers in state agencies / NGOs; academics/ others pertaining to their discipline/ field of knowledge or their area of work and the usual information/ consent process will be used (Students need to be aware that many agencies (e.g. Tusla / CFA; see recadmin@tusla.ie) have their own ethics review procedures and no research (high / low risk) can be undertaken with agency managers / employees or service users without making a formal application).  | The research engages with persons or groups who could be considered vulnerable or who, due to their circumstances, could be considered vulnerable. Research involving groups where permission of a “gatekeeper” is normally required for initial access to members – for example, ethnic or cultural groups, native peoples or indigenous communitiesSee the following guidance document re: Guidance for Researchers conducting Research with Vulnerable People: <https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/research/researchatucc/ethicswebpage/VulnerabilityGuidanceDocumentApril2019.pdf> |
|  | Free and Informed Participation | Potential research participants could not feel any degree of coercion/ pressure to participate in my research. A clear outline of how participants would be informed and recruited is provided in my application.  | The research is being conducted with persons who may feel coerced or in a position not to be able to say ‘no’ to me.  |
|  | Potential Harm / Risk to Participants | There are no significant risks to research participants – no harms or consequences beyond what one expects to experience in everyday life. | Psychological harm (upset)/ physical harm (pain, discomfort trauma)/ legal harm/ social harm /economic harm to be experienced by research participants.  |
|  | Demands on Participants | The study is not demanding of research participants and no more than the minimum information and number of participants will be recruited. | The study is demanding of research participants (prolonged time/ repeat engagement/ intrusive research/ challenging themes, activities). |
|  | Data Sources | Research involves reviewing published information in the public domain (e.g. media analysis; review of published literature/ research studies; a meta- analysis; a rapid review).  | The research involves children as research subjects.See the following guidance document re: Guidance for Researchers conducting Research with Vulnerable People: <https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/research/researchatucc/ethicswebpage/VulnerabilityGuidanceDocumentApril2019.pdf> |
|  | Researcher Competency | The research is within my competency, my knowledge, my understanding and my level of experience. | The research is outside my competency, my knowledge, my understanding and my level of experience. |
|  | Researcher’s Personal Safety | The research is not likely to cause me any upset or risk my safety in any way. | The research could put me in danger in an unsafe situation or could cause me a lot of upset, anxiety or trauma. The research could put me in a very compromising situation with persons who know and trust me or with persons who have authority over me. |
| **ACTION:** | **Requires Supervisor/ Team approval prior to being commenced.** | **Requires SREC/CREC approval prior to being commenced.** |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Key Student Obligations |
| * Attend to the ethical issues when planning your research from the outset.
* Use the ethics forms to discuss the ethics of your research with your supervisor and to prepare you for research engagement in your capacity as a less experienced researcher.
* Read the [University Code of Research Conduct](https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/research/researchatucc/researchsupports/researchintegrity/UCCCodeofResearchConductV2.4-approved14thSeptember2021.pdf) (2021) and the ethics section of your course handbook.
* Keep your supervisor informed of any changes to your research plans, particularly changes that have ethical implications.
* Inform your supervisor if an unforeseen ethical problem arises in the course of your research and seek the supervisor’s advice to address it.
* Ensure that your completed Ethics Form is appended to your end of year project with copies of information sheets, consent forms and the research instruments (questionnaire, interview schedule, focus group discussion/ topic guide).
 |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Key Supervisor Obligations |
| * Read the [University Code of Research Conduct](https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/research/researchatucc/researchsupports/researchintegrity/UCCCodeofResearchConductV2.4-approved14thSeptember2021.pdf) (2021) and be familiar with the ethics section of the relevant course handbook for students.
* Ensure that ethics are a key focus of the supervisory relationship and that students meeting you are discussing the ethics of their research with you and are aware of the ethical requirements they have to fulfil in the conduct of their research, and are doing their best to embed ethics in all aspects of their research from start to finish.
* Submit a list of the student projects that were approved to the NT4006 module / FS4102 / FS4002 research dissertation co-ordinator.
 |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Key School Research Ethics Committee Obligations |
| * Exercise oversight of the research being conducted by students on the course.
* Ensure staff supervising projects have access to relevant information and support pertaining to the research ethics involved in student projects.
* Maintain a list of approved projects and submit to the research project module coordinators at the end of the year.
 |

# Useful Reading

Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004) Ethics, reflexivity, and “ethically important moments” in research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(2), p. 261–280.

Iphofen, T. & Tolich, M. (2018*) The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research Ethics.* (available online). <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/the-sage-handbook-of-qualitative-research-ethics/book251811>

# Codes of Ethics

The Nutrition Society

<https://www.nutritionsociety.org/about/governance/policies/scientific-conduct-and-research-policy>

<https://www.nutritionsociety.org/about/governance/policies/ethical-behaviour-and-standards-conduct>

CORU Code of Conduct (which includes notes about ethical research conduct) (2019)

<https://coru.ie/files-codes-of-conduct/drb-code-of-professional-conduct-and-ethics-for-dietitians.pdf>

<https://www.ift.org/news-and-publications/food-technologymagazine/issues/2001/march/features/ethically-responsible-research>

# **Appendix A**:

# School Research Ethics Form



**School of Food and Nutritional Sciences**

Research Ethics Form

**Introduction**

In UCC, research ethics is the remit of the University Ethics Committee (UEC). There are three ethics subcommittees under the remit of UEC; Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC), Clinical Research Ethics Committee and Animal Experimentation Ethics Committee (AEEC). If you wish to publish your research you should submit your ethics application to one of these committees. If you are unsure which University ethics committee you should apply to, please see: <https://www.ucc.ie/en/research/support/ethics/>

If you do not intend to publish your research you can apply to the School Research Ethics Committee, a subgroup of the School Research Committee, within the School of Food and Nutritional Sciences. This committee reviews research proposals submitted by university staff and both undergraduate and taught postgraduate students seeking ethical approval for research. The work of this committee is strongly informed by the UCC Code of Research Conduct (2021).

See: [UCC Code of Research Conduct](https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/research/researchatucc/researchsupports/researchintegrity/UCCCodeofResearchConductV2.4-approved14thSeptember2021.pdf)

This committee seek to ensure that supervisors and researchers are sufficiently supported to undertake research (which may involve human participants) to the highest possible standards and with due regard to the welfare of all concerned.

**PLEASE NOTE:**

**Supervisors, please complete the online ethics application form, including all relevant documentation**, **prior to any research being conducted involving human subjects. It is strongly advised that all students adhere to the guidance on ethical issues provided by their supervisors and consult with supervisors should unanticipated ethical issues arise. Students should ensure that all forms being used to recruit, inform, and gain the consent of research subjects as well as the research instruments (e.g. focus group interview schedule/ questionnaire) being used have been reviewed by supervisors prior to conducting any primary research/ fieldwork. Students should carefully abide by any ethical guidelines for their research provided by their course teams or in their course handbooks, as well as the UCC Code of Research Conduct in their research. See:** [UCC Code of Research Conduct](https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/research/researchatucc/researchsupports/researchintegrity/UCCCodeofResearchConductV2.4-approved14thSeptember2021.pdf)

Should disagreements or difficulties arise in relation to ethical issues that cannot be resolved between supervisor and student or course team and student, the assistance of the chair of the School of Food and Nutritional Sciences Research and Innovation Committee can be sought (e.g. Prof. Seamus O’ Mahony sa.omahony@ucc.ie ).

**PART A: Complete this check list**

*If your answer falls into any of the shaded boxes, please address each point later on in the form.*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **YES** | **NO** | **N/A** |
| 1 | Do you consider that this project has significant ethical implications? |  |  |  |
| 2 | Will the main research procedures be outlined to potential research participants in advance, so that they are informed about what to expect? |  |  |  |
| 3 | Will research participation be voluntary?  |  |  |  |
| 4 | Will informed consent be obtained in writing from research participants, in plain English? |  |  |  |
| 5 | Will you tell research participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason, and (where relevant) omit questionnaire items/ questions to which they do not wish to respond? |  |  |  |
| 6 | Will data be treated with full confidentiality/ anonymity (as appropriate)[[1]](#footnote-1)?  |  |  |  |
| 7 | Will anonymised data be securely held for a minimum period of ten years after the completion of a research project, in line with the University’s *Code of Research Conduct* (2021)?  |  |  |  |
| 8 | If results are published, will anonymity be maintained and participants not identified? |  |  |  |
| 9 | Will participants be debriefed at the end of their participation and provided with contact email address (i.e. will you give them a brief explanation of the study and address any concerns they may have after research participation)? |  |  |  |
| 10 | Will your project involve deliberately misleading participants in any way? |  |  |  |
| 11 | Will research participants include children/ young persons (under 18 years of age)? |  |  |  |
| 12 | If yes to question 11, is your research informed by the UCC *Child Safeguarding Statement*, which sets out the legal requirements under the *Children First Act 2018*:[UCC Child Protection Policy 2018](https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/support/ocla/policies/UCC_Child_Protection_Policy_5April2018-Final.pdf) |  |  |  |
| 13 | Will your project require you to carry out “relevant work” as defined in the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Acts 2012 to 2016?[[2]](#footnote-2) |  |  |  |
| 14 | Do you require official Garda Vetting through UCC before collecting data from children or vulnerable adults? Having Garda Vetting through another body is not sufficient; UCC Garda Vetting is required. |  |  |  |
| 15 | Will research participants include people with any disabilities, learning or communication difficulties? |  |  |  |
| 16 | Will research participants include patients/ service users/ clients? |  |  |  |
| 17 | Will research participants include people engaged in illegal activities (e.g. drug taking, illegal Internet behaviour, crime, etc.)? |  |  |  |
| 18 | Is there a realistic risk of participants experiencing either physical or psychological distress due to research participation?  |  |  |  |
| 19 | Is there a realistic risk of you, as the researcher, experiencing either physical or psychological distress? |  |  |  |
| 20 | If yes to question 18, has a proposed procedure for linking the participants to an appropriate support, including the name of a contact person, been given? |  |  |  |
| 21 | If yes to question 19, has a proposed procedure/support structure been identified?  |  |  |  |
| 22 | Are the research participants also students with whom you have some current/previous connection (class members, friends, tutor, etc.)? |  |  |  |
| 23 | Will research participants receive payment/ gifts/ vouchers/ etc. for participating in this study? |  |  |  |
| 24 | Are you accessing, collecting or analysing confidential agency documents or case files?  If yes, please give details of compliance with the agency’s policy on data protection and confidentiality below in your review. |  |  |  |
| 25 | If your research is conducted on the internet, does it involve human participants (e.g. through web surveys, social media, accessing or utilising data (information) generated by or about the participant/s; or involve observing human participants in their online interactions/behaviour)? If yes, please review and utilise the UCC policy for conducting Internet Research\* |  |  |  |

**\***[**https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/support/academicsecretariat/policies/researchpolicies/GUIDANCEDOCUMENTFORCONDUCTINGRESEARCHONONLINEPLATFORMSfinal22Jan19.pdf**](https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/support/academicsecretariat/policies/researchpolicies/GUIDANCEDOCUMENTFORCONDUCTINGRESEARCHONONLINEPLATFORMSfinal22Jan19.pdf)

**If you did not tick any shaded boxes proceed to Part B and complete the relevant form. If you did tick shaded boxes please proceed directly to Part C and complete the relevant form.**

**PART B: DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT**

*Ethical review requires that you* ***reflect*** *and seek to* ***anticipate*** *ethical issues that may arise,*

*rather than reproduce copious text from existing research proposals into these boxes.*

*Entries should be* ***concise*** *and relevant to the point/ question.*

|  |
| --- |
| **A. Very brief description of your study (Title)** (15-25 words max.)[e.g. This is a narrative literature review (desk-based) examining group work interventions with young people on the theme of healthy eating] |
| Text here |

|  |
| --- |
| **B. What is your study about? (Aim and Objectives / Key Research Questions)** (100-150 words max.) |
| Text here |

|  |
| --- |
| **C. Concise statement of *anticipated* ethical issues raised by your project. How do you intend to deal with them?** For example, your research could be desk-based but may still involve sensitive/ controversial material. In relation to any kind of research with human subjects you need to address the issue of **informed consent** and how that will be addressed, **safe data storage** (see page 8 of this document) for the duration of the project and beyond and how you will safeguard the **rights and welfare of research subjects.**  |
| Text here |

|  |
| --- |
| **D. Have you responded to the checklist items?** |
| Text here |

**PART C: DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT**

*Ethical review requires that you* ***reflect*** *and seek to* ***anticipate*** *ethical issues that may arise,*

*rather than reproduce copious text from existing research proposals into these boxes.*

*Entries should be* ***concise*** *and relevant to the point/ question.*

|  |
| --- |
| **A. Very brief description of your study (Title)** (15-25 words max.) |
| Text here |

|  |
| --- |
| **B. What is your study about?** (Please include your research objectives and research questions here. 200 words max.) |
| Text here |

|  |
| --- |
| **C. Brief description and justification of methods and measures to be used** (attach questionnaire/ interview protocol/ focus group discussion guide etc.) |
| Text here |

|  |
| --- |
| **D. Participants** (recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/ inclusion criteria, detail permissions to be sought/ secured already). How will you ensure that research participants’ rights and needs are looked after in the research process?  |
| Text here |

|  |
| --- |
| **E. Concise statement of *anticipated* ethical issues raised by your project. How do you intend to deal with them? Please address *all* items where your answers fell into a shaded box in the self-evaluation above.** (200 words max.) |
| Text here |

|  |
| --- |
| **F. Where will you store your data (paper and electronic files) over the duration of the project and after it has ended? How will you anonymise the data? How will you ensure no unauthorised person will be able to access confidential research materials?** (150 words max.) **See Safe Data Storage on page 8 and read it prior to answering this question.**  |
| Text here |

# **Appendix B**: the sample information sheet

**INFORMATION SHEET**

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**Purpose of the Study.** As part of the requirements for [*degree*] at UCC, I have to carry out a research study. The study is concerned with [*keep it brief and simple – 1-2 sentences. There is no need to go into the theoretical complexities of the topic.*]

**What will the study involve?** The study will involve [*Indicate the procedure and time commitment, giving the simplest possible explanation and avoiding jargon and unnecessary detail.*]

**Why have you been asked to take part?** You have been asked because [*Because they are specifically or generally suitable to provide data for your study*].

**Do you have to take part?** [*The answer is no! – participation is voluntary. Explain about signing a consent form. Ideally they get to keep the information sheet and a copy of the consent form. They should be told that they have the option of withdrawing before the study commences (even if they have agreed to participate) or discontinuing after data collection has started. Where data are identifiable (e.g. from interviews yielding qualitative data), it’s useful to allow for afterthoughts by letting them withdraw within two weeks of participation and ask to have their data destroyed. Explain all this in writing.*]

**Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?** [*Yes! - but remember, there’s no such thing as absolute confidentiality – don’t ever make promises you may not be able to keep. Usually the relevant term is anonymity rather than confidentiality. For example:* Yes. I will ensure that no clues to your identity appear in the thesis. Any extracts from what you say that are quoted in the thesis will be entirely anonymous.

**What will happen to the information which you give?**[*Kept confidential from third parties (including workers’ superiors, if relevant); will it be destroyed after a period? For example:*] The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study, available only to me and my research supervisor. It will be securely stored (say how). On completion of the project, they will be retained for minimum of a further ten years and then destroyed.

**What will happen to the results?** [*For example:*] The results will be presented in the thesis. They will be seen by my supervisor, a second marker and the external examiner. The thesis may be read by future students on the course. The study may be published in a research journal.

**What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?** [*If you think there are none, say so, but not in a black-and-white way. If they may feel distressed, mention the possibility and refer to the next section. For example:*] I don’t envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part. It is possible that talking about your experience in this way may cause some distress.

**What if there is a problem?** [*Tell them what they can do, for example:*] At the end of the procedure, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. If you subsequently feel distressed, you should contact (*e.g. the investigator, The Samaritans – give contact details - or their GP). Where the data are gathered online or in paper & pencil form, one might say that no harm is anticipated but that some of the questions are of a personal nature; contact details for support services can be included in the debriefing page at the end of the data gathering instrument*].

**Who has reviewed this study?** [*School Research Ethics Committee? Clinical Research Ethics Committee? Social Research Ethics Committee? – for example:]*

**Any further queries?** If you need any further information, you can contact me: [*Name, mobile number, email address. To protect your own privacy, you should delete this information from the finished thesis. It is also advisable to use a dedicated mobile phone number for this purpose, as distinct from your personal mobile. Where the research is being conducted by a student, it is desirable to also provide contact details for a supervisor*].

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form overleaf. [*Note the formatting – it’s best not to have text dribbling on to the next page – but don’t make the font size too small, either – say, not less than size 12.*

# **Appendix C**: the sample consent form

**CONSENT FORM**

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*This consent form is designed with qualitative research in mind. Where quantitative methods are used, issues such as quotations and audio-recording do not arise.*

I………………………………………agree to participate in [*name*]’s research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my interview with [*name*] to be audio-recorded.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box:)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview 

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview 

Signed: ……………………………………. Date: ………………..

PRINT NAME: …………………………………….

# **Appendix D**: Guidelines on Safe Data Storage

**Guidelines on Safe Data Storage**

As researchers, it is imperative that we can assure our participants that their data will be stored securely; this is of course particularly important where potentially sensitive personal details are involved. It is not adequate to simply say that the data will be stored safely. Exact detail is required as to the use (and location) of locked cabinets, management of audio files, encryption of laptops, electronic storage and so on.  Where possible **physical data** such as survey forms etc. should be converted to electronic format as soon as possible and the originals shredded. However, if you must retain physical data then it should be safely stored on premises at UCC or in a locked cabinet in a secure location.

**Treating Identifiable Data**

1. Data should be converted to anonymous form as soon as is possible, thus opening the possibility of storing the data on OneDrive etc.
2. If data is not anonymised then the UCC IT Department recommend using \*Research Data Store OR Departments/Schools own local secure storage, (e.g. UCC NAS, etc.) if this exists.
3. If identifiable data is not stored on \*Research Data Store or NAS the researcher must provide a justification for this and must ensure that the laptop or PC on which the data is stored is encrypted and password protected.
4. Applicants should never store research data on a USB and only use an encrypted portable hard drive for short-term storage until data has been anonymised.
5. Applicants must consider how to maintain safe storage of their data beyond the life of their laptop/ PC to meet the 10-year requirement in the UCC Code of Research Conduct.
6. All laptops and PCs used to access data must be encrypted and password protected.

**Treating Anonymised Data**

1. If confidential data has been anonymised or if you have public or non-sensitive data, then the UCC-supplied OneDrive for Business through UCC Office 365 or Google Drive through the UCC-supplied G-Suite (formerly Google Apps for Education), can be used for data storage. The **personal** versions of OneDrive and G-Suite **should not** be used to store research data.

If you have questions about these services, please contact UCC IT Helpdesk.

**\*Research Data Store**provides a network based shared data storage facility for the UCC Research community. It is for active research projects and is not an archive service. A Principal Investigator (PI) or Head of Department can request storage (maximum 1TB) for a research project.  Research Groups will have access to 1TB of storage and folders can be shared with researchers in either the central or student domains. **This service can be requested by a PI or by a Head of Department on behalf of members of a research team/students.**

To make a request to use Research Data Store, visit [http://Servicedesk.ucc.ie](http://servicedesk.ucc.ie/) and select option 4 (Data Storage and NASAccess <https://www.ucc.ie/en/it/services/datastore/>)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **UCC Device Encryption Service** | <http://www.ucc.ie/en/it/services/encryptionlaptop/>  | -- |
| **UCC Staff IT Services**  | <http://www.ucc.ie/en/it/services/staff/>  | List of all UCC staff IT services. |
| **HEAnet FileSender** | <http://www.heanet.ie/services/hosting/filesender>  | HEAnet FileSender is a way to share large files. It works through your web browser and allows you send encrypted files to any email address in a safe manner. |

# **Appendix E**: UCC Guidelines for Conducting Internet Research

**GUIDANCE DOCUMENT FOR CONDUCTING INTERNET RESEARCH**

Online platforms and online communities are widely used by researchers as rich sources of research data. Given the increasing value of user generated data available on internet-based communities, researchers must give consideration to the potential ethical and legal challenges that may arise as a result of collecting and using data available online.

This Guidance Document is for UCC researchers conducting internet research.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Do I need Ethics approval for Internet Research?**

You need ethics approval for internet research in all situations where the research involves human participants whether through web surveys; accessing or utilising data (information) about/generated by the participant/s; or observing human participants in their online interactions/behaviour.

**Where do I apply for Approval for Internet Research Ethics Approval?**

Applications for ethics approval for internet research are made to the Social Research Ethics Committee: see <https://www.ucc.ie/en/research/support/ethics/socialresearch/>

**What Ethical Factors should I take into account in formulating Internet Research?**

As part of the social research ethics approval process at University College Cork, we recommend that the researcher (and the research team members) consider the following questions while completing their application for ethics approval:

**Intrusiveness**—Will the proposed research be intrusive to the online community? Will you be a “passive” participant in the community versus will you be actively involved in the community by participating in communications with other group members?

**Perceived privacy**— What is the level of perceived privacy of the online community? Is it a closed group requiring registration? What is the membership size? What are the group norms? Has the website/online platform a privacy (or data protection) notice for the site which the researcher will need to be cognisant of when using?

**Vulnerability**—How vulnerable is the online community you intend to research? For example, a mailing list of children under the age of 18 or a group of adults with an intellectual disability would be considered a vulnerable community. Other communities e.g. people with illnesses; people encountering economic difficulties may in some circumstances be considered a vulnerable community.

**Potential harm**—Has the intrusion of the researcher or publication of research results the potential to harm individuals or the online community as a whole?

**Informed consent**—Is informed consent from community members required or can it be waived? If it is required how will it be obtained?

**Confidentiality**—How can the anonymity and confidentiality of participants be protected (if verbatim quotes are given originators can be identified easily using search engines, thus informed consent is always required).

**Consultation** – Prior to submitting your application for ethical approval, have you communicated with the internet community owners/members? Considering the nature of your research, is this a prerequisite for commencing your study?

**Platform/Community Knowledge** – Have you read the Terms of Use of the online community/internet site? Do you feel you need to seek permission to conduct research on the site? If so, have you obtained permission to conduct research on this site?

**Data Acquisition** – Are you using data scraping techniques to acquire data from an online community or internet site? Have you received permission from the site owners or site users to acquire this data? Is the data acquisition method you are using considered ethical i.e. are you using approved APIs to acquire data from the internet site? Have you checked (and can you comply with) the website terms and conditions?

**Table 1. Decision Making Tool for Conducting Ethical Internet Research (Adapted from Eysenbach & Till, 2001)**

The framework illustrated in Table 1 should be used as a decision-making tool to inform the researcher (and the research team) of the potential ethical issues arising from conducting internet research. This framework should be considered as flexible, as the technology and related regulations continue to change so too will the ethical frameworks for conducting internet research (cf. Townsend and Wallace, 2016).

It is the responsibility of the researcher to ask sensible questions about the ethical implications of conducting internet research prior to commencing a research project. If in doubt, speak to your supervisor.

**References**

Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AOIR Ethics Committee Approved by the Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0), 08/2012. Endorsed by the AOIR Executive Committee, 09/2012. Approved by the AOIR general membership, 12/2012.

Eysenbach, G., & Till, J. E. (2001). Ethical issues in qualitative research on internet communities. BMJ: British Medical Journal, 323(7321), 1103–1105. Townsend, L. and Wallace, C. (2016). Social media research: A guide to ethics. Available at: <http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_487729_en.pdf>

1. Researchers must ensure the confidentiality of data gathered in the course of the research (i.e. where that data is not already in the public domain). Where appropriate they must ensure privacy or anonymity of human participants. Researchers should not intrude into persons’ lives beyond what is required for the purpose of the research. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Relevant work constitutes any work or activity which is carried out by a person, a necessary and regular part of which consists mainly of the person having access to, or contact with, children or vulnerable adults. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to Association of Internet Researchers (2012) internet research –

a) utilizes the internet to collect data or information, e.g., through online interviews, surveys, archiving, or automated means of data scraping;

b) studies how people use and access the internet, e.g., through collecting and observing activities or participating on social network sites, listservs, web sites, blogs, games, virtual worlds, or other online environments or contexts;

c) utilizes or engages in data processing, analysis, or storage of datasets, databanks, and/or repositories available via the internet;

d) studies software, code, and internet technologies e) examines the design or structures of systems, interfaces, pages, and elements

f) employs visual and textual analysis, semiotic analysis, content analysis, or other methods of analysis to study the web and/or internet-facilitated images, writings, and media forms;

studies large scale production, use, and regulation of the internet by governments, industries, corporations, and military forces. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)